

Higher education for every circumstance

You're never too old or too busy to get a degree, thanks to online learning

Lucy Jolin

Online learning isn't just for hobbyists. It's opened up a whole new world of possibilities for those who want to move forward in their careers, but aren't able to take the time off, or can't afford a conventional university degree. And it's not hard to see why so many are choosing the online route.

First and foremost, there's the convenience factor: online degrees are designed to allow far more flexibility than face-to-face learning - vital for those who can't spare three years off.

At the University of Roehampton, for example, 87% of students from 150 countries who are learning online also work full-time. Online business and management programmes have seen the biggest upsurge in demand. "Whether it's to remain competitive in their industries, advance their career or achieve a personal goal, more adults are choosing to go back to school and enrol in an advanced degree programme," says Prof Clare Pickles, vice-president of Academic Affairs for the University of Roehampton's online programmes.

Online education offers students the opportunity to balance the demands of career, school, family and other commitments, she says: "Our online programmes are comprised of multiple modules, each of which is broken down into six two-week learning units. Instead of rigid weekly deadlines that may not be suitable for many working adults, who often juggle various commitments, students study in two-week learning units. This enables them to plan their study around their professional schedule and family priorities."

At the National Design Academy,



A degree of flexibility: online courses fit in around your lifestyle
Photograph: Getty



If you're an adult, you can't write off three years and go away to have fun and study



whose degrees are awarded by the University of Staffordshire, a student can follow an entire online-learning pathway in interior design, from a level three (A-level equivalent) diploma through a BA Hons degree to, finally, a master's. Or, if they like, they can take stand-alone courses. Again, it's the flexibility of online learning that's key.

"If you're an adult, you've lost that opportunity to write off three years and go away and have fun and study at university, as life has happened to you," says Pauline Riley, director of the National Design Academy. "Our students are often working full time or part time. Many have small children or are carers for elderly parents. There's a million and one reasons why. So what they want is the ability to study when

it suits them. When they've got time, that's when they can do it. We offer complete flexibility - you choose your own start date, you work at your own pace, and you don't have to book in for seminars at set times. If you want to start on Christmas Day, you can. And if you're up at two in the morning with a sick child, you can log into our forum and there will usually be someone there who's been through the same thing and can support you."

This growth and flexibility wouldn't be possible without the rise of technology. Smartphones and tablets allow students to study anywhere, and "m-learning" is hugely popular among students who have grown up with handheld devices and are now old enough to study online. "We have

seen a growth in online learning overall - particularly with younger students, as they are becoming more aware of it being recognised as an alternative mode of study," says Julie Stone, director of University of Derby Online Learning. "All our content is developed so students can learn from a mobile device of their choice, and we have developed content that can be re-configured for all technology."

However, the freedom of being able to study anytime and anywhere doesn't necessarily mean online learning is an easy option. It can be just as challenging as face-to-face - if not more. "Online learning requires students to have self-discipline to commit the time necessary to find, read, understand and critique the material, and then to access the other support, such as video-conferencing with tutors or face-to-face meetings," says John MacIntyre, pro vice-chancellor at the University of Sunderland.

"The key is that the online environment gives accessibility, but can lack the structure of a timetabled, taught course. However, many courses now offer 'blended' learning approaches, incorporating taught, online and other forms of learning."

Studying online also has the advantage of being able to draw on a vast user base. A typical classroom includes students from all over the world - and they won't necessarily just remain pixels on a screen. "Interaction with classmates provided me with a better understanding of my coursework, because it gave me the opportunity to hear their different perspectives and international insights," says Saleh Salim al Kindi, who lives in Oman and has an MSc in Project Management from the University of Roehampton.

"It was a really great moment when I met my classmates face-to-face for the first time at graduation in London," he adds, "after years of interacting and engaging online only."

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